

## **Jordan: Democracy at a Dead End**

*Shadi Hamid*

In a March 15th interview, ABC news anchor Peter Jennings asked King Abdullah II if Jordan would ever become a constitutional monarchy. “Absolutely,” the king said. When Abdullah came to power in 1999, there was widespread speculation that this young, charismatic Sandhurst and Georgetown-educated leader—and other young monarchs in the region—would be willing to embark on reforms and gradually share power. Yet, as of late, it has been non-monarchical systems such as Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt that have begun to experience democratic openings. Jordan, on the other hand, has witnessed a disturbing wave of de-liberalization.

First, there was the recent professional associations debacle, another manifestation of the struggle for the soul of a nation caught between its growing Palestinian majority and its close relationship with the United States. In a country with notoriously impotent political parties, a civil society with little grassroots reach, and a parliament dominated by pro-regime tribalism, the 120,000 member-professional associations have become the primary venue for opposition to Jordan's controversial foreign policies—and apparently an intolerable annoyance to a government eager to demonstrate its usefulness to Washington.

Enter Interior Minister Samir Habashneh. Catching civil society off guard with a series of harsh statements in January 2005, he demanded that the associations “completely halt” all political activities. Demonstrations and sit-ins were banned, while the Professional Associations Council was ordered to remove political banners from its premises. Amman governor Abdul Karim Malahmeh announced that “any kind of event, gathering or meeting, save for weddings, should obtain prior approval.”

In early March, the government presented a draft professional associations law to parliament, requesting it be acted upon urgently. Most observers believe this 26-article bill would constitute a debilitating setback for democratization. It authorizes the Audit Bureau, for example, to monitor associations' funds to ensure they are spent only on internal activities. The draft law also changes voting procedures so that the professional councils are elected indirectly through “intermediary commissions.” To eliminate any doubt about the government's intentions, Habashneh stated openly that the law aimed to eliminate the “prevalence of one current”—meaning Islamists—within the associations.

The opposition launched a vigorous response, calling on parliament to fight the bill. Fifty-nine Members of Parliament (MPs) signed a memo asking that the government withdraw the draft, although nearly 20 withdrew their signatures, apparently due to government pressure. Several journalists went on record as saying that the government pressed newspapers to refrain from publishing news about the crisis.

Adding yet more tension to an already volatile situation, the government also proposed a new political parties law. The law prohibits the use of mosques, clubs, professional

associations, or sports clubs for political party activities, bans recruiting and campaigning at educational institutions, and bars activities that could harm Jordan's relations with other countries.

With its knack for offending friends and foes alike, Prime Minister Fayez's government fell in April and Habashneh lost his job. At least temporarily, the brakes were put on Jordan's frightening skid toward full-blown authoritarianism. The king reaffirmed his country's commitment to political reform and promised that the new cabinet's policies would be in line with Jordan's ambitious 10-year national agenda. Yet there remains reason to be skeptical. Newly appointed Prime Minister Adnan Badran has used a less confrontational tone than his predecessor, but has not yet withdrawn either the professional associations law or the political parties law. Moreover, while his cabinet is filled with Western-educated technocrats and private-sector reformers, few are known for their love of democracy.

Badran's cabinet has come under unprecedented attack. MPs are angry that they were not consulted before its formation, and even regime loyalists accused Badran of neglecting the country's southern regions in his appointments. Thus far, 45 out of 110 MPs have said they will withhold confidence from the government; 17 from the Islamic bloc are expected to join them when it comes to a vote.

In response to the growing criticism, both the king and Badran have recited vague platitudes about Jordan's ambitious plans for reform. But while the king appears well intentioned, his focus on improving government performance and efficiency misses the mark. The real impediments to democracy lie in Jordan's political structure and anachronistic constitution which, among other things, ensures that the king is “immune from any liability and responsibility.” With his vast powers, the king also appoints the prime minister and all 40 members of the Senate, whose approval is needed for any proposed bill to become law.

By any standard, Jordan is nowhere close to joining the ranks of the world's democracies and remains, in form and function, an absolute monarchy—a fact emphasized by the latest political crises. In his interview with Peter Jennings, King Abdullah claimed that Jordan was on its way to becoming a constitutional monarchy. The heavy-handed government actions of recent months, however, give ample reason for doubt.

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